BC-Endangered-Species ; INDEX: Environment; HL:Nature losing the battle with humans in southwestern Ontario, officials say

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Byline: By Joe Matyas

Body

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LONDON, Ont. (CP) - Southwestern Ontario, home to the widest range of plant and animal life in Canada, also has the dubious distinction of being the region of the country with the most wildlife species at risk.

-BODY- Eighty per cent of the 159 species in Ontario that have been declared at risk by provincial and federal authorities are found in the region.

"We have a disproportionate share of species at risk," said Hal Schraeder, wildlife biologist for the Aylmer district of the Ontario ministry of natural resources. "It's a long and growing list."

The ministry's Aylmer district covers about a third of southwestern Ontario's geography.

The district's hardwood forests, grasslands, wetlands, river systems, sandy and other natural environments have produced a dazzling array of wildlife, dozens of which are now endangered, threatened or vulnerable.

Some 131 species of amphibians, birds, butterflies, fish, mammals, plants and reptiles in the district have been listed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada and Committee on the Status of Species at Risk in Ontario.

The list includes varieties of ash, cucumber and chestnut trees, orchids, violets, trilliums, poppies, cactus, frogs, ferns, ginseng, eagles, falcons, gulls, owls, pelicans, sparrows, warblers, woodpeckers, chub, sunfish, trout, walleye, badgers, foxes, flying squirrels, moles, voles, rattlesnakes, turtles and monarch and blue butterflies.

The list is a hierarchy and catalogue of urgency, said Schraeder.

"It signifies these species are in trouble and going downhill, in some cases fast," he said.

Wildlife has faced a "cocktail" of threats from humans in southwestern Ontario, including aggressive hunting and fishing, environmental pollution and destruction of habitats, Schraeder said.

Habitat loss is the major reason why the 131 species are now considered at risk in the district, he said.

Eighty per cent of the region is settled, occupied and used by 1.3 million people for residential, industrial, commercial, agricultural and recreational purposes.

"Human beings and wildlife have been competing for space for a long time," said Ron Gould, species at risk biologist for the Aylmer district.

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"We've all benefited from human activity, but nature has paid the price."

Species at risk are ranked as vulnerable, threatened, endangered, extirpated and extinct.

Extinct means gone from the planet like the dodo bird and passenger pigeon and extirpated "gone from here - which in our case is Ontario," said Schraeder.

Four of Ontario's five extinct species - passenger pigeon, blue pike, longjaw cisco (fish) and Eastern elk - were once well entrenched in the southwest.

Also extinct is the deepwater cisco.

All five of the province's extirpated species - greater prairie chicken, gravel chub, paddlefish, blue-eyed Mary (flower) and Illinois Tick-trefoil (herb) - were once found in the southwest region in great numbers.

The ministry of natural resources, with the help of conservation authorities, university biologists and dedicated wildlife enthusiasts, is now monitoring 32 endangered, 31 threatened and 59 vulnerable species in the district.

Endangered species are those coming perilously close to disappearing, threatened species are those that could become endangered if their habitats continue to be assailed and vulnerable species are those in decline that need to be watched.

Eighteen plants, seven birds, three reptiles, two butterflies and the American badger are in danger of disappearing from the district.

Fifteen plants, six fish, five reptiles, three amphibians and two birds are threatened.

Twenty-two plants, 18 fish, 11 birds, four reptiles and three mammals are considered vulnerable.

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